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ABSTRACT

A study of the Philadelphia Lutheran Settlement House's Women's Program was conducted to determine what methods and practices the program uses to maintain a high retention rate (75 percent) of students in its adult basic education (ABE) classes and what else can be done to retain students more effectively. Data were gathered from two basic literacy classes and two adult basic education classes (which began with a total of 78 students) through interviews with students who dropped out, in-depth interviews with a sample of students, follow-up interviews with students who remained in the classes, and discussion with the teachers of the classes. Analysis of the data comparing students who dropped out of the program and those who were retained identified three main factors that lead to student retention: support from others to continue attending classes, sense of self-esteem and personal empowerment, and quality of teacher interaction. Recommendations were made to improve retention rates by increased follow-up with students who miss classes, a more extensive orientation and registration program, ongoing student support systems, staff development, and improved student support services. (Appendixes to the report include the following: education program statistics for 1991-92, initial and second student interview forms, interview sheet for students who dropped out, teacher interview questions, and a sample of collaborative student writing to welcome new students.) (KC)

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Towards the ABE Promised Land: Creating a Successful Learning Environment by Examining Retention Rates

Final Report
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Introduction

The Lutheran Settlement House Women's Program is a multi-faceted social service agency which has provided education, counselling and employment services to women, men and children in the Fishtown/Kensington section of Philadelphia since 1976. The Women's Program currently conducts: human services training; clerical/computer literacy training; personal counselling; a 24 hour domestic violence hotline in English and Spanish; vocational counselling; counselling for teens at risk of dropping out of school; a teen parent project providing education and employability skills to women in shelters; literacy, adult basic education, English as a Second Language, high school equivalency classes; tutor training and tutoring; and a drop-in childcare center for program participants. All services are open to both men and women and are provided without cost to participants.

The goal of the Women's Program is to provide educational, employment, counselling and childcare programs targeting low-income and minority women which offer the tools for empowerment and self-sufficiency. The student body is approximately 30% men, 70% women; multi-racial, 37% white, 33% African-American; and 22% Hispanic; and reflects a wide age range.

Since 1979, the education program has been partially funded by the Pennsylvania State Department of Education. This funding has enabled the program to offer education classes to those students who lack a high school diploma and to offer tutor training for those who want to become tutors. Approximately 1,100 students a year attend education classes at the Women's Program and 50 to 100 obtain their high school equivalency diplomas each year.

The Women's Program has been concerned about retention rate in adult education classes. With a retention rate which averages 75%, the Women's Program is proud of this retention rate, yet recognizes the need to further strengthen our program through this project. We were eager to pinpoint our strengths and weaknesses, to take action where necessary, and to share our model with other programs.

This project allowed the Women's Program to examine a number of variables which influence student retention and to analyze which had the greatest impact on retention of adult students. The variables studied included: student self-esteem, personal and community empowerment, progress toward student goals, student expectations, use of Women's Program services, and teacher behavior in the classroom. Based on the knowledge gleaned from this project, the Women's Program has created staff development sessions to examine teacher needs and concerns as well as to address problems which have led to student dropouts. The long-term goal of this project is to develop and implement a model which other adult education programs can replicate in order to increase retention rate of adult students in their own programs and to create staff development workshops to increase the efficacy of their teachers.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of this project is to create a model adult education program as measured by retention rates in selected ABE classes.

Objective I: Collect quantitative and qualitative information on the targeted classes. This information was collected in the manner described below.

Method 1: Collect and compile qualitative and quantitative information on students enrolled in targeted classes. The curriculum developer designed student interview forms for students in the four classes in this study and interviewed students when they entered the program, when they had been in the program for at least three months, and when they left the program. Also, careful notes about the number of students who remained in class and those who made an early separation were kept. (The student and teacher interview forms are included in the appendix section of this document.)

Method 2: Track students in classes from September to December, interviewing drop-outs as they leave and interviewing retained

students in December. Careful records were kept on the students in the classes involved in this study. Students were interviewed in person when classes began and when they had been in the program at least three months. If students made an early separation, staff conducted telelphone interviews with students.

Method 3: Observe and evaluate teachers in the targeted classes at least twice a month from September to December. Teachers whose classes were involved in the study were observed and evaluated. In addition, teachers were asked to complete a survey form detailing their own observations of the class.

Method 4: Interview teachers in December to ascertain their perceptions of the class. The curriculum developer conducted interviews of all four teachers throughout the period of this study.

Method 5: Keep detailed records on students and classes, i.e. referral information. Detailed records on the student retention and dropout were kept during the course of this study.

Objective 2: Compile the collected information into a series of staff development workshops. This objective was met in the manner described below.

Method 1: Make comparisons between high and low retention classes and teachers. After careful analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected about student retention and teacher observation and surveys, the project staff developed a list of recommendations to the Women's Program.

Method 2: Compile comparative data into staff development workshops. The data was compiled into two staff development workshops conducted during the period from February to June. In addition, the curriculum developer has written a grant proposal for a 353

grant to conduct a more extensive series of staff development sessions based on the information from this study.

Method 3: Compile all data into a manual. The data, analysis, and recommendations to the practice were compiled into a manual which can be used by other adult education programs to replicate this study. The manual is appended to this document.

Method 4: Disseminate manual. Upon completion of printing, the manual will be disseminated through ADVANCE and PAACE workshops.

Method 5: Do workshops at 2 sites in the Philadelphia area. One workshop presenting the results of this study was conducted at the Women's Program. The curriculum developer has written a proposal to present a workshop on this study for the PAACE Midwinter Conference.

Procedures

A. Data Collection

To gather this information, four classes were chosen to study: two basic literacy classes and two adult basic education classes. Classes were chosen so both a more experienced teacher and a less experienced teacher was represented at each level. The classes began in September with the following numbers of students:

Class	Type	Teacher	Orig. Class Size
One	0 - 4	Alice	28 students
Two	0 - 4	Barbara	13 students
Three	5 - 8	Peg	21 students
Four	5 - 8	Cameron	16 students

Classes one and three had more experienced teachers, with four years and two years of teaching experience, respectively. Classes two and four were

taught by less experienced educators, with one year and no previous teaching experience, respectively. Also, classes one and two were taught by non-college educated teachers who received their GED and teacher training at the Women's Program.

Information from the students in these classes was collected in a variety of manners. First, quantitative data was collected from each class to ascertain the number of students who had left the class in the first semester (September to December). Each student who dropped out was contacted and interviewed to determine the reason for his or her early separation from the class, whether s/he had support to continue the class, and whether s/he felt s/he was meeting goals during the class.

Second, to gain information about student variables, a sample of students in each class (23 students in all) was given an in-depth interview at the beginning of the class to ascertain their expectations, motivations, goals, support structure, and sense of self-esteem.

Third, students who remained in class through the second semester were given follow-up interviews to determine their reasons for continuing to attend class, whether they felt they were attaining the goals they had set for themselves, their sense of self-esteem, and what impact they felt the class had on their life. (Copies of these three student interview forms are included at the end of this report.)

In addition to data collected from students, the teachers in each of these classes provided information about the class. The teacher in each class was interviewed and completed a survey about teaching style and philosophy, overall impressions of the class, and curriculum and materials utilized in the class. Teachers in each class were observed to gain further insight into their teaching style.

B. Data Analysis

A group of staff members including the curriculum developer, two teachers, and the education coordinator participated in the data analysis. The procedure included both quantitative and qualitative analysis. First, after the students' initial interviews were completed, information was categorized

Conclusion

"Towards the ABE Promised Land: Creating a Successful Learning Environment by Examining Retention Rates" was a successful project which met its goals and objectives. The project yielded important information which will assist the Women's Program and other adult eduation programs in developing programs which better meet the needs of the student population and staff development which address teachers' needs and concerns.

This study was designed to answer one major question: "What methods and practices does the Women's Program currently utilize to maintain a high retention rate and what else can be done to retain students more effectively?" As stated earlier, in any study of reasons for adult student drop-out, one must take into account the conditions in the adult learners' lives which prevent them from continuing class: health problems, childcare problems, personal or family difficulties, need to find immediate employment, or inadequate housing or lack of housing all lead to students dropping out of classes. In drawing conclusions about this data, however, literacy practitioners must identify factors which learners or the literacy organization have the ability to change.

In analyzing and comparing the data between students who dropped out of the program and those who were retained, this study has identified three main factors which lead to student retention at the Women's Program: support from others to continue attending classes, sense of self-esteem and personal empowerment, and quality of teacher interaction.

This study bears out that support to continue classes is a crucial need for adult learners. Students who were retained in the program for more than one semester located support for their work in a variety of sources. All students who were retained had support from family or friends to attend the program; this support sometimes took the form of encouragement to achieve personal goals (for one woman, it was competition with her sister who was enrolled in a different GED class at the Women's Program). Many students had support from husbands, friends, mothers or sisters who cared for their children while they attended school or studied for class. Students who continued in class also sought support from classmates and Women's Program services such as childcare, personal counselling, and employment counselling or training. A far greater

percentage of the retained students took advantage of the additional services available at the Women's Program; the availability of these services clearly made a difference in their ability to continue attending classes. Students who lacked this support were more susceptible to dropping out because of personal problems, housing difficulties, family crises, or the perception that they were not achieving their goals.

Students' sense of self-esteem and personal empowerment increased proportionately with the amount of time they participated in class. One must question whether these qualities developed as a result of the class or whether students who had greater self-esteem and empowerment were better able to continue attending the class. Regardless, these qualities were crucial in allowing students to continue the program. It is an unfortunate, but understandable, finding that this study identified a less dramatic increase in learners' sense of empowerment in their community. Feeling empowered in one's community is a much more complex goal which necessitates, among other things, greater discussion of community issues in the classroom.

Teacher interaction was the third important factor which became evident as a result of this study. When students were asked direct questions about teacher behavior, students stressed personal interactions with their teachers and commented that they were "fun", "friendly", "patient", "good-hearted", etc. Clearly, a teacher's general personality, interest in, and degree of caring about students had a great impact. In other portions or the student interviews and through the teacher surveys, it became clear that curriculum, materials, and structure of the class had an impact on student satisfaction, empowerment, and, therefore, retention. A higher retention rate was observed among teachers who used a variety of materials which related to students' interests and themes including: commerically produced books, Women's Program manuals, as well as material from student writings, newspapers, magazines, and other pamphlets. Also, higher student retention and greater support among classmates was observed in classes which encouraged student leadership and were structured to have a variety of student interactions, including: large group discussion, small group interaction, individual work, and peer tutoring.

Dissemination

This project will be disseminated to other adult education programs, community organizations and ADVANCE. Upon completion of printing, the manual will be sent to area literacy organizations. Also, copies of the report will be distributed at upcoming workshops.

Towards the ABE Promised Land: Creating a Successful Learning Environment by Examining Retention Rates

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this project was to investigate the variables which led to both student retention and student dropout in four classes at the Women's Program and to create staff development sessions based on this information. The variables studied included: student self-esteem, personal and community empowerment, progress toward student goals, student expectations, use of other Women's Program services, and teacher behavior in the classroom. Based on the knowledge gained from this investigation, the Women's Program has created staff development sessions to examine teacher needs and concerns as well as to address problems which have led to student dropouts. The long-term goal of this project is to develop and implement a model which other adult education programs can replicate in order to increase retention rates in their adult education classes and to create staff development workshops to increase the efficacy of their teachers.

It is the Women's Program's hope that the description of the project in this report will assist other adult education programs in developing their own retention evaluations. Programs wishing to use this retention study as a model should pay special attention to the design of project and appendix sections. The appendix contains student and teacher interview forms which can be duplicated or ammended for use by other programs.

II. Description of Program

Because it would be difficult to fully understand this project without perceiving how it fits into the larger structure of the Women's Program, this section will provide an overview of the program and explain why this retention study was an important component of the overall program.

The Lutheran Settlement House Women's Program is a comprehensive social service agency which has provided services to women, men and children in the Kensington/Fishtown area of Philadelphia since 1976. The mission of the Women's Program is to empower poor and low income women by providing education, employment training, counseling, and

childcare services. The student body is approximately 20% men, 80% women; multi-racial, 41% white, 34% African-American, and 24% Hispanic; and reflects a wide age range.

The Women's Program currently conducts a variety of services: human services training, clerical/computer training, job search workshops, displaced homemaker job counselling, personal counselling, drug and alcohol counselling, a 24-hour domestic violence hotline in English and Spanish, vocational counselling, counselling for teens at risk of dropping out of school, a teen parent project providing education and employability skills, literacy classes, adult basic education classes, English as a Second Language classes, high school equivalency classes, tutor training, tutoring, and a drop-in childcare center for program participants. All these services are open to both men and women and are provided without cost to participants.

The Program consists of six units: Education, Employment, Domestic Violence, Teen Parent Education and Employment Project, and Childcare. The strength of the Women's Program rests on the cohesion and cooperation between the different units. For example, one woman who began education classes conducted in a shelter also received personal counselling through the Domestic Violence Unit and is now enrolled in a Human Services Training offered by the Employment Unit. As this example illustrates, the Women's Program is truly "one-stop shopping" for social services.

The cornerstone of the Education Unit is the 28-35 adult education classes offered each year. Classes are available for beginning literacy (non-readers to 4th grade reading level), adult basic education (5th through 8 th grade reading level), General Equivalency Diploma preparation (above 8th grade reading level), and English as a Second Language students. Classes are conducted at the Lutheran Settlement House, two homeless shelters, four drug rehabilitation facilities, a Latino community center, a local hospital, and a community center for HIV+ individuals. This year, the Education Unit served approximately 1,114 students. The average retention rate in all of the Women's Program Education Unit classes from September to December 1991 was 77%.

The Women's Program is pleased with this retention rate, but aware

that there is room for improvement. The purpose of this study, conducted within the Education Unit, is to document the reasons for this high retention rate, ascertain what factors in the students' lives, teacher behavior, and program structure contribute to retention, and establish how we can improve this rate through staff development, improved coordination between the units, and programmatic changes.

III. Design of the Project

A. Data Collection Procedure

The program variables explored in this study are general classroom environment, teacher behavior and student usage of other services within the Women's Program. The student variables explored include student expectations, self-esteem, personal and community empowerment, goals, motivations (specifically, whether students are inner- or outer-directed) and type of support structure.

To gather this information, four classes were chosen to study: two basic literacy classes and two adult basic education classes. Classes were chosen so both a more experienced teacher and a less experienced teacher was represented at each level. The classes began in September with the following numbers of students:

Class	Type	Teacher	Orig. Class Size
One	0-4	Alice	28 students
Two	0-4	Barbara	13 students
Three	5-8	Peg	21 students
Four	5-8	Cameron	16 students

Classes one and three had more experienced teachers, with four years and two years of teaching experience, respectively. Classes two and four were taught by less experienced educators, with one year and no previous teaching experience, respectively. Also, classes one and two were taught by non-college educated teachers who received their GED and teacher training

at the Women's Program.

Information from the students in these classes was collected in a variety of manners. First, quantitative date was collected from each class to ascertain the number of students who had left the class in the first semester (September to December). Each student who dropped out was contacted and interviewed to determine the reason for his or her early separation from the class, whether s/he had support to continue the class, and whether s/he felt s/he were meeting goals during the class.

Second, to gain information about student variables, a sample of students in each class (23 students in all) was given an in-depth interview at the beginning of the class to ascertain their expectations, motivations, goals, support structure, and sense of self-esteem.

Third, students who remained in class through the second semester were given follow-up interviews to determine their reasons for continuing to attend class, whether they felt they were attaining the goals they had set for themselves, their sense of self-esteem, and what impact they felt the class had on their life. (Copies of these three student interview forms are included at the end of this report.)

In addition to data collected from students, the teachers in each of these classes provided information about the class. The teacher in each class was interviewed and completed a survey about teaching style and philosophy, overall impressions of the class, and curriculum and materials utilized in the class. Teachers in each class were observed to gain further insight into their teaching style.

B. Data Analysis Procedure

A group of staff members including two teachers, the tutor training facilitator, and the education coordinator participated in the data analysis. The procedure included both quantitative and qualitative analysis. First, after the students' initial interviews were completed, information was categorized according to the following themes: student goals, expectations for this class, support for continuing education classes, student feelings at registration and initial testing, students' perceptions of teacher behavior,

impact of other classmates on students' continued participation, use of other Women's Program Services, suggestions for improvements the Women's Program can make, and sense of empowerment/self-esteem. After the second interviews with students who had remained in the program were completed, data from the two sets of interviews were compared and contrasted.

Secondly, interviews from students who had dropped out were collected and students' reasons for leaving the program were listed. This data were examined closely to ascertain the students' expectations of the class, whether the students felt they had met the goals they had set and whether the program or teacher could have done anything to retain these students.

Third, teacher interviews, surveys, and observations were collated and classified according to the following categories: teaching style, philosophy of teaching, general impressions of the class, curriculum methods and instructional materials.

Lastly, a committee of staff members read, analyzed and discussed the data and reached conclusions about what student variables, teacher variables, and program variables contributed to student retention. After reaching these conclusions, staff development sessions were planned to address some of the needs of teachers and students which were identified as a result of this process.

C. Findings of Data Collection and Analysis

1. Quantitative Data - Number of Students Who Dropped

Records were kept to determine the number of students who dropped from each of the four classes in this study. A total of 78 students started in these four classes during the week of September 16, 1991. By December, 21 students or 26% had dropped. For this study a "drop" is defined as a student who attended class at least once and did not return. Students who registered for class, but did not attend any class sessions are not included in this number. Also, students who transferred to another class within the

Women's Program were not listed as drops. The chart below indicates the number and percentage of the students who dropped in each class during the first semester.

Class	Level	Beginning Class Size	# Dropped	% Dropped
One	0-4	28 students	7	25%
Two	0-4	13 students	5	38%
Three	5-8	21 students	7	33%
Four	5-8	16 students	2	13%

Information on the data that students separated from the class was recorded. 33% (7 students) of the students who made an early separation from the class dropped within the first two weeks. 52% (11 students) dropped in October and 14% (3 students) dropped in November. It should be noted from this data that teachers in classes one and two, who were community people with no college training as teachers, had retention levels which are not discernibly different from the college trained teachers. Therefore, academic qualifications does not appear to be a deciding factor for retention.

2. Qualitative Data - Interviews with Students who Dropped

Staff members attempted to contact all 21 students who dropped from these four classes, but met with only limited success since many former students moved or their phones were disconnected. In attempting to contact these 21 former students, we found three wrong numbers, 5 lines were disconnected, 5 no answers after three tries on different days and different times, and eight successful contacts.

Among the students who were contacted, the following reasons were given for leaving the class: one 17-year-old student returned to high school classes; two students were unable to continue because there was insufficient space in the childcare unit; three students had scheduling difficulties due to employment; and two students left because of health reasons.

In addition to interviewing the students, each teacher was asked to

comment on why they felt students dropped out of the class. The reasons most frequently cited included health problems, returning to work, personal/family problems, problems with children or childcare arrangements. Many teachers also commented that adult learners had a great need to see immediate change. Students entered classes with the goal of finding a job and decided to seek employment immediately, rather than continue classes. Also, students sometimes had unrealistic expectations about what they could achieve in class in a very short time and left when they expectations were not met.

In response to questions about student goals and whether the class met their needs, four students responded that they had achieved some of their goals during the class. One of these students sufficiently improved his reading ability in order to pass the Commercial Truck Drivers' certification test. Two of these students felt they improved their reading ability. Another replied that he didn't achieve his goals. (The student's goal was to receive his GED and he was not yet ready for GED testing.) Three students were unable to answer this question because they had only attended the class for one day.

In response to the question, "Was the class different than you expected? If so, How?", two students responded positively that the class was different and better than they had expected. One student responded, *"Yes the way it started out with games and getting to know the other people in the class was different and I liked it."* Another student responded, *"I expected it to be worse, but I liked it. The class was good."* Two students (in class #1, the largest class in this study) responded that the classroom was too small and more crowded than they had expected. One student replied, *"Yeah, the room was too tiny, too crowded. There were so many people in there."* Another replied, *"There were too many people, and I needed a lot of individual help."*

Drawing conclusions from this data is difficult for a number of reasons. Beyond the fact that the study is quite small, this type of interview always presents the question of how honest students will be with a person whom they don't know well and whether they will truly reveal difficulty with the program, teacher, or in their personal lives. Interviewers sought to ask

appropriate questions to probe for more detailed and accurate reasons about the reasons for students' early separation; however, this was not always possible. Despite these difficulties, conclusions can be reached from this study.

Most literacy practitioners are aware that adult students leave educational programs because personal problems such as their own or their family's health problems, inadequate housing, lack of childcare and myriad other barriers. This study asks a further question concerning how the teacher and/or program influences people's decisions to leave or stay.

One problem identified in this study is the gap between students' expectations and their skill levels. This is exemplified by the student who felt he did not achieve any goals because he had not attained his GED after only one month in class. Findings suggest the need for teachers to help adult learners to set realistic long and short-term goals and to recognize progress toward these goals.

Another problem perceived is that students rarely notify the teacher that they are going to be dropping the class. Of the eight students interviewed, only one attempted to notify her teacher of her decision to leave the class. Unfortunately, a number of students, such as those who had scheduling difficulties, could have been transferred into another class and continued to pursue their goals. To mediate this difficulty we suggest teachers call all students who have dropped to ascertain the reason.

We also perceived difficulty when students were transferred into another class. Two of the students who dropped were transferred to another class at their request, but never appeared in the new class. In discussion with other teachers, this seems to be a common phenomenon. A solution to this problem might be to have teachers who are receiving a transfer student from another class make contact with that student before the first class.

3. Initial and Follow-up interviews with Attending Students.

Students in each of the four classes participating in this study were interviewed to ascertain their goals, expectations, and support system for

the class as well as their feeling about the program, their teacher, and their own sense of self-esteem and empowerment. The first interview contained 31 questions; each interview lasted 20 to 40 minutes. 23 students participated in this round of interviews. The second interview contained many of the same type of questions, but was abbreviated into a shorter format with 13 questions. Each interview lasted 10 to 20 minutes; 14 students of the original 23 students participated in this interview process.

Registration and Orientation to Program

The first interview began by asking students questions about their initial reactions to the program, made at registration and placement. These feelings varied from nervousness, fear and anxiety to more positive excitement. One student mentioned receiving no introduction or explanation about the testing process: *"I was really nervous. They didn't tell me much about the test and I felt really alone while I was taking it. The lady who placed me was real nice."* Another student thought it was possible to fail the placement test: *"I thought I would fail. I thought the test was to see if I could get in. I knew I had failed. Alice talked to me for placement and said I'd be in her class. I said, 'Well, I won't be no good.' She said we'd work on it together. I felt more comfortable that maybe she could help me."* A third student said it would be helpful to know more about what to expect from the class: *"I didn't know what to wear the first day, what to expect, what to bring to class, or that we would get free books."* As a result of these comments of the adult basic education classes has collaboratively written a piece for new students about what to expect on the first day of class, which will be made a part of a more extensive orientation. (See appendix.)

Attitudes Towards Education

Students were also asked about their expectations about adult education. Many students expected this educational experience to be like their previous experience with school: traditional and boring. Not many of the students had the opportunity to discuss their expectations with their teacher or other staff members. In general, they found that the reality of

this new class was vastly different; here classes were interesting, they had more support and more friends, and were able to work at their own pace in smaller classes. One student said about her experience at the Women's Program:

> *I didn't expect to understand things as well as I did in this class. I didn't think we'd have as much discussion or that we would talk about things that related to my real life. We talk about drugs, being in recovery, black history. Sometimes we would just put the books away and talk.*

Another student expected adult classes to be just like high school:

> *In high school, the teacher would write on the board and be boring. It's more interesting here than I thought it would be. I look forward to coming and I'm surprised I've learned so much.*

Another student said:

> High school teachers didn't take the time for you if you needed help. Teachers here really take time to help you or you can stay after school for tutoring, so you can understand. It's not like high school.

Student Goals

In assessing student goals, most students articulated realistic goals. Obtaining a GED was the goal listed most frequently by students. Other goals included learning to read, write and do math, getting jobs (either general jobs or specific careers), and improving themselves. Most realized that long range goals such as obtaining jobs necessitating technical training or college degrees would take many years, while a number had unrealistic goals in terms of the amount of time necessary to achieve certain goals, particularly in the length of time needed to obtain the GED.

In the second interview students were asked, "Are you pleased with what you have learned in class so far? Did you learn more, less, or the same as you expected to learn?" Most students replied that they learned more than they had expected to learn in the class. These are a sample of students' comments about what they had learned in the class:

"I learned more in this time than I learned in all of high school!"

"I have learned more than expected and I'm not the onliest one. I'm doing better than some. I could learn more if I take the time out to study."

"I didn't expect I could learn anything, but I've learned."

"I learned a lot more than I thought. I never put things in paragraphs before."

Some students also mentioned that they had done a great deal of non-academic learning during their class. One student mentioned that *"I learned to work with other people and ask for help. Before I wouldn't ask questions. Now I ask questions when I don't know. You're never too old to learn."* Another student said *"I've also shared stories with other people and I've met different types of people."* This student mentioned that she learned a lot about people of different races and cultures in her class. Another student shared, *"I've learned more than I thought and a lot more about myself."*

Student Support Systems

Both the first and second interviews asked students to comment about the type of support system they had which enabled them to attend the class. Most students expressed that they did have support to attend classes. Most of the new students gained support for attendance at LSH from their family, friends, teachers and classmates. A number of students mentioned that family or friends who had previously attended the Women's Program encouraged them to come. Two students were discouraged from attending

classes by, respectively, a mother and a husband, although both these students received encouragement from other sources. Many students remarked that support from others was important, especially practical support, such as taking care of children during class or study time.

Students were asked about their support system again in the second interview. All students did have support for attending classes. Most students, however, mentioned that their inner motivation was the most important factor in their entering and continuing their class. As one student said, *"My Aunt Venus says, 'Go ahead on back and get your GED, 'cause I know you can do it.'* It's wonderful to have that support, but I made the decision to come back on my own. I didn't tell anyone I was coming back at first."

Two of the students in the second interview had friends or family members who discouraged them from coming to classes. One student said that the people who lived in his neighborhood discouraged him from coming to class. *"They told me I was too stupid to come to class, but I know that's not true now. Especially the ones who are into selling drugs. They want me to be a lookout for their drug deals."* This student was self-confident enough to be able to disregard this discouragement and continue to attend class.

Student/Teacher Relationship

The factor which was clearly the most important one for students was the characteristics of their teachers. Students were very animated when they described their teachers and how they felt about them. Students' reactions to their teachers had a clear impact on their ability to learn and their desire to stay in class. Students' descriptions of the teachers at LSH included the following words: nice, understanding, down-to-earth, supportive, honest, direct, patient and good-hearted. One student said that her teacher *"makes me feel anything is possible."* Another described her teacher as *"patient and good-hearted. She's really there for you. She makes me feel like anything's possible."* Another said that her teacher made her feel comfortable in the class because *"She's a nice person and she's easy to talk to. Students can make choices about what they want to do in class."* Another said,

"She's like a friend. She talks straight up and tells it the way it is." One of the teachers who is a GED graduate of the Women's Program is seen as a role model for students. She is described by one of her students in the following way:

> *She's a friend and she's just amazing. She went through a lot, too. You know, she was just like us. Nothing stopped her and if it can happen to her, it can happen to us.*

Student Interaction

Classmates were also a crucial, but secondary, factor which encouraged retention for most students. When asked about how their classmates affected their performance in class and their motivation to continue, student reactions differed greatly depending on how the teacher structured her class. Students in class Two, whose teacher emphasized lecturing and whole group instruction through workbooks with little or no small group work offered the most negative comments about their classmates. Members of this class mentioned that they sometimes felt put down by classmates. Other students remarked that some class members were *"slower than the rest of us. They hold us back."* The class structure and friction between the students may well have led to the fact that this class had the lowest retention rate in this study.

Students in the other three classes commented more positively on the interaction with their classmates. Teachers in classes three and four emphasized small group instruction and the teacher of class one utilized peer tutoring in the classroom. Many students in classes three and four commented that working in small groups helped students to build an effective support system in the class and reduced their anxiety about learning. When asked what the teacher had done to make them comfortable in the class, students said, *"She had us get together into groups so we got to know other people. We do reading groups and it helps people feel comfortable starting to read out loud to each other."* Another said, *"I like when we do math together as a group We work things out on our own and if we*

have a question, then we'll ask the teacher. She'll write out on the board and explain it."

When asked to describe their feelings about their classmates, students in these classes said, *"They are all nice people.. We all work together and help each other out."* Another student replied, *"We get along well. Most of the time we work together as a whole group, but sometimes we do small groups because we range in different levels and areas we're good at."* This student's comment exemplifies a phenomenon identified in this study: students whose teachers had the class learn and solve problems through small group activities had a more positive sense of the range of abilities of different students. They spoke less about one student being "smarter" and more about a range of levels and areas of expertise. Students in Class One whose teacher emphasized peer tutoring commented that tutoring their classmates improved their own self-esteem. Doing things together was "fun" and it made the work easier. Because many of the tutors in this class were students themselves, many students felt encouraged about their ability to help others learn.

Program Support Services

One of the strengths of the Women's Program, as discussed earlier, is that it offers counseling, job training, and childcare services. As part of the study, students were surveyed to ascertain how many took advantage of these services. In the initial interview 27% of the students used other Women's Program services (5 used counselling services 1 student attended a job training orientation). Among the students retained who were interviewed in the second round, 50% of the students utilized the other services available. (Four of these students used counselling services, two used employment training, and one used the childcare facilities.)

Suggestions for Improvement

The last question asked of students in each interview was to suggest how the Women's Program could improve its classes. Many students in the

first interview replied that there was nothing the program could improve on; students who participated in the second interviews considered this question more carefully and provided suggestions more frequently. A total of 23 suggestions were made to improve classes at the Women's Program. The greater number of suggestions involved problems caused by lack of resources. Eight students commented that the classrooms were too crowded. Many students (4) suggested that we provide additional class days. A number of students (4) commented on the book shortage caused by lack of funding. Some suggestions included ideas which can be implemented in the classroom, such as more tutors in the classroom (1), more frequent use of computers (1). A number of students' suggestions included activities that they or their classmates could do to improve the class: listen more (1), attend more regularly (1), become a tutor (1). Finally, one student developed her own method to solve the retention problem: *"I'd get a car and go to everybody's house and take them to school."*

IV. Impact on Students: Self Esteem and Empowerment

Interviewers used a number of questions in both the initial and follow-up interviews to assess whether students retained in the program changed in their sense of self-esteem and personal and community empowerment. It has been the assumption of many adult education programs that students who are retained become more self-confident and empowered; this study attempted to document these assumptions and determine whether a higher level of self-confidence and empowerment led to increased student retention. To determine sense of self-esteem and personal empowerment in the classroom, students in the initial and follow-up interviews were asked to rank how often they participated in class discussions according to the following categories: "frequently", "sometimes", "rarely", or "never". In the initial interview, 80% of students replied either "frequently" or "sometimes"; this percentage increased to 93% in the follow-up interview.

To assess students' self-esteem in other areas of their lives, students were asked "how do you feel about yourself?" and rated themselves on a list of "very good", "good", "okay", "bad", or "very bad". As an indication of

students' rise in self-esteem, the percentage of students replying that they felt "very good" or "good" rose from 65% in the first interview to 72% in the follow-up interview. (Based on teacher observation, the growth in students' personal empowerment is probably higher than actually indicated by these statistics. It is important to note that students were given the initial interview approximately two weeks after attending the class, during which time a great deal of empowerment and group building occurs.)

Students were asked two questions in order to assess their level of empowerment in both personal and community arenas. In the first and second interviews, students were asked, "Do you feel you can solve problems in your life?" The number of students replying yes to this question rose from 71% in the first interview to 93% in the second interview. Many students felt that making the change to attend classes illustrated the ability to solve problems in their life. Others made the following comments about the problems they solved as a result of their attendance in class:

If I don't want to do things or think things should be done differently, I'll say it. I have more courage to change things now.

I used to be very shy before I came to class. I left my husband who used to hit me and now I feel a lot more secure about myself. I never thought I could live on my own, but I'm doing okay. I never thought I could stand up to my husband. I used to pray for death a lot before. I don't do that anymore.

I've really learned to talk things out.

Yes, I'm more positive, more motivated. I feel good about myself, like I can do it.

Students were also asked, "Do you feel you can make changes in you neighborhood?" The percentage of students responding yes to this questions rose from 5% in the initial interview to 21% in the follow-up

interview, illustrating an extremely significant impact on community empowerment. Many students expressed that problems in their communities were overwhelming and impossible to change and th accurate perception that one person alone cannot effect the change needed to solve these problems. Despite these overwhelming odds, students did find ways to change their community. Some of the comments included:

> *My 9 and 10 year old daughters play school a lot with the kids outside and they read books to the kids. They do this more since I've been in school. I'd rather see them doing that than ripping and running up and down the street.*

> *This weekend I'm working with other people on my block to clean up a lot to make a playground for the kids.*

V. Conclusions About Data

This study was designed to answer one major question: "What methods and practices does the Women's Program currently utilize to maintain a high retention rate and what else can be done to retain students more effectively?" As stated earlier, in any study of reasons for adult student drop-out, one must take into account the conditions in the adult learners' lives which prevent them from continuing class: health problems, childcare problems, personal or family difficulties, need to find immediate employment, or inadequate housing or lack of housing all lead to student dropouts. In drawing conclusions about this data, however, literacy practitioners must identify factors which learners or the literacy organization have the ability to change.

In analyzing and comparing the data between students who dropped out of the program and those who were retained, this study has identified three main factors which lead to student retention at the Women's Program: support from others to continue attending classes, sense of self-esteem and personal empowerment, and quality of teacher interaction.

Student Support

This study bears out that support to continue classes is a crucial need for adult learners. Students who were retained in the program for more than one semester located support for their work in a variety of sources. All students who were retained had support from family or friends to attend the program; this support sometimes took the form of encouragement to achieve personal goals, for one woman it was competition with her sister who was enrolled in a different GED class at the Women's Program, many students had support from husbands, friends, mothers or sisters who card for their children while they attended school or studied for class. Students who continued in class also sought support from classmates and Women's Program services such as childcare, personal counselling, and employment counselling or training. A far greater percentage of the retained students took advantage of the additional services available at the Women's Program; the availability of these services clearly made a difference in their ability to continue attending class. Students who lacked this support were more susceptible to dropping out because of personal problems, housing difficulties, family crises, or the perception that they were not achieving their goals.

Self- Esteem and Empowerment

Students' sense of self-esteem and personal empowerment increased proportionately with the amount of time they participated in class. One must question whether these qualities developed as a result of the class or whether students who had greater self-esteem and empowerment were better able to continue attending the class. Regardless, these qualities were crucial in allowing students to continue the program. It is an unfortunate, but understandable, finding that this study identified a less dramatic increase in learners' sense of empowerment in their community. Feeling empowered in one's community is a much more complex goal which necessitates, among other things, greater discussion of community issues in the classroom.

Classroom Environment and Instruction

Teacher interaction was the third important factor which became evident as a result of this study. When students were asked direct questions about teacher behavior, students stressed personal interactions with their teachers and commented that they were "fun", "friendly", "patient", "good-hearted", etc. Clearly, a teacher's general personality, interest in, and degree of caring about students had a great impact.

In other portions or the student interviews and through the teacher surveys, it became clear that curriculum, materials, and structure of the class had an impact on student satisfaction, empowerment, and, therefore, retention. A higher retention rate was observed among teachers who used a variety of materials which related to students' interests and themes including: commerically produced books, Women's Program manuals, as well as material from student writings, newspapers, magazines, and other pamphlets. Also, higher student retention and greater support among classmates who observed in classes which encouraged student leadership and were structured to have a variety of student interactions, including: large group discussion, small group interaction, individual work, and peer tutoring.

VI. Recommendations to Practice

Based on this study, the Women's Program makes two main types of recommendation to literacy practitioners: recommendations for further study and programmatic and classroom changes.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from a study involving such a limited number of teachers and learners. A broader study which examines the impact of variables such as student self-esteem, personal and community empowerment, progress toward student goals, student expectations, use of counselling, employment, and childcare referrals; teacher behavior, and curriculum materials and methods would be of great value to literacy practioners. Increased participation of students or alumni in this study would be advisable. The Women's Program plans to continue this study by

surveying all students twice a year on their reactions to the program and by conducting a teacher survey in order to ascertain their staff development needs.

Recommendations for Programmatic Changes

The following have been identified through this study as areas to be addressed by the Women's Program in order to impact on retention of students. Changes to be implemented are listed below each. These recommendations may be applicable to other community-based literacy organizations.

Increased Follow-up with Students

- Teachers will call students who have missed more than three class sessions to ascertain why the student has not attended and identify the student's needs.

- Students in classes will be paired so that if one student misses class, the other student can call and give information about what the student missed that day.

Registration and Orientation

- A more extensive orientation and registration will be conducted for students so that they will:

  1. learn about all Women's Program services

  2. receive information written by other students about the program

- Ongoing student support systems will include:

  (1. presentations by staff from each unit in the Women's Program

  (2. a newsletter with student writings about the changes they have made through the program

Teacher Behavior/Curriculum

- The Women's Program has received for funding for a nine-part staff development series specifically designed to address retention through training teachers to use more student-led groups, encourage use of Women's Program curriculum manuals, and educate about different teaching methods.

- Teachers will be surveyed to ascertain their specific and holistic needs for staff development.

- Teachers will be paired with peers who have expertise in the area in which they need development.

- Anonymous student evaluations of class, teacher, and program will be implemented.

Improved Student Support Services

- The coordination between the Women's Programs units will be strengthened to increase student's access to support services.

- More counselling will be provided for students.

- An on-site student support group will be created which will include alumni.

- Support groups will be created at off-site locations which have less access to on-site support services.

- A Vista volunteer will be hired to develop a list of referral resources for services not provided by the Women's Program.

Appendices

1. Education Program Statistics (1991-1992)

2. Initial Student Interview Sheet

3. Second Student Interview Sheet

4. Interview Sheet for Students who Dropped

5. Teacher Interview questions

6. Collaborative Student Writing to Welcome New Students

Lutheran Settlement House Women's Program

Education Program Summary Report

1991-1992

Total Students Served:		1114
0-4	10%	
5-8	28%	
ESL	15%	
GED	47%	
Age:		
16-24	37%	
25-44	54%	
45-59	7%	
60 and older	2%	
Sex:		
Male	30%	
Female	70%	
Race:		
American Indian	4%	
Asian	4%	
Afro-American	33%	
Latino	22%	
White	37%	
Total classes offered:		31
LSH		20
off-site		11
Graduates:		79
Students In the Process of GED Testing (as of 6/92)		125
Students Who Progressed One Grade Level		164
Students Who Progressed Two or More Grade Levels		128
Rate of Retention		54%

Tutoring:

Total Enrolled in Tutor Training	131
Tutor Training Completors	88
Students Who Received Tutoring	223
Total Tutors in Women's Program	17

Name Teacher Time

Interviewer's Name

1. Did you just start in the program? when?

   If no, how long have you been in the program?

2. Why did you decide to come to school?

3. Why did you come to the Women's Program?

4. Do you have support for taking ed. classes? from whom?

Do you have people who discouraging you from taking classes? who?

5. How did you feel at registration, during the intro? testing? placement?

6. How did you feel the first day of class?

7. Do you have goals for your education?

8. What are your goals?

9. How long will it take you to achieve your goals?

10. Do you have expectations for what you will do in your class?

11. What are your expectations for the class?

12. Has anyone talked to you about your expectations and what the program can do to your expectations?

13. Is there a difference between your expectations for the class and the actual class?

14. How do you feel about your teacher?
Do you like her? why?

Do you dislike her? why?

15. Do you feel like you can talk about personal problems with your teacher? learning problems?

16. Has your teacher done anything to help you feel comfortable talking with her?
if yes, what has the teacher done?

if no, does the teacher make you feel uncomfortable? how?

17. Do you feel like you could talk to your teacher if there was a problem in the class?

18. Do you like the other people in the class?

19. Has the teacher done anything to help everyone feel comfortable together?
if yes, what has the teacher done?

if no, what has the teacher done?

20. What could the teacher do to make the class better?

Is there anything the program could do better?

21. Do you feel like anyone in the class puts you down?

22. What would you do (or what do you do) if you felt that someone in the class was alv putting you down? if the teacher was always putting you down?

23. Have you ever talked with anyone else in the Program, i.e. a D.V. counselor? who? helpful?

24. Do you feel like you can change problems in your life? in your neighborhood?

25. How do feel about your classroom? (the actual room) the building?

26. Can you name things that help you stay in the program? i.e. help you from gettir discouraged?

27. How often do you talk in class?
Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

28. Do you have school age children?
if yes, how do you feel in parent -teacher conferences?

29. What would you do if your child was having a problem in school?

30. How do you feel about yourself?
Very good good o.k. bad very bad

31. Do you feel that what you study in class is related to your life?
if yes how?

if no, does that bother you?

32. Do you use what you learn in class in your daily life?
if yes, how?

if not, how come? or does that bother you?

Student Retention Study
Second Round of Questions for students who have remained in class.

Name: Teacher:

Interviewer's Name:

1. Do you have friends or family members who encourage you to take this class? Who?

2. Do you have any friends or family members who discourage you from taking this class? Who?

3. Are you pleased with what you have learned in class so far? Did you learn more, less, or the same as you expected to learn?

4. Have you ever been discouraged or have you wanted to stop coming to class? What encouraged you to continue?

5. How do you feel about your teacher now that you have been in class for a longer time?

6. Describe what you like and don't like about your classmates.

7. Describe a typical day in your class. What do you work on? Do you work individually, with the whole class, in groups?

8. What would you do to make this class better?

9. How often do you talk in class?
Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

10a. How do you feel about yourself?
Very Good Good Okay Bad Very Bad

b. Do you feel differently about yourself since you've been in class? If so, how?

11. Have you talked with anyone else in the Women's Program (e.g. personal counselor, employment counselor)? Who? Were they helpful?

12. Do you feel that you can solve problems in your life? Explain.

13. Do you feel that you can make changes in your neighborhood? Explain.

Student Retention Study

Questions for Students who have dropped out.

(Explain that we are contacting students who have left class to see whether there is anything the Women's Program can do to improve its services and make it easier for students to stay in classes.)

1. When did you decide not to come to class anymore?

2. What made you decide to leave the class?

3. Why did you decide to attend classes at the Women's Program? What kind of goals did you have for your education?

4. Did you feel that you were achieving any of those goals during the class?

5. What did you think the class would be like?

6. Was the class different than what you expected? If so, how?

7. How was this class the same or different from classes you had in high school or grade school?

8. Is there anything the program can (or could have done) to help you stay in class?

9. Did you talk with your teacher about your decision to leave the class? If not, why?

Teacher Interview Questions
Retention Study

1. a. What kind of books did give out to your class?

b. Did you supplement these texts with any other materials? What other materials did you use? Where did you get these materials (newspaper, pamphlets, library?)

2. How did your class respond to these materials? What did they especially like or dislike?

3. What was the general structure for your class? Describe an ordinary class session. Did students work in small groups? Individually? The whole class?

4. What was the long-term lesson plan for your class? What subjects did your class work on first? What subjects did you cover?

5. What are your general feelings about the class? What lessons or periods of the class were especially successful? What things would you like to do differently in the future?

6. What changes did you see in your students during the course of the class? Comment on attention, frequency and amount of talking, group interaction, academic changes, life changes as a result of the class, etc.

7. Why do you think students left the class? Do you think the program could have done anything to retain these students?

8. What kind of staff development sessions would you like to participate in?

WELCOME TO LUTHERAN'S ADULT CLASSES

This will not be like school was before. You will learn at your own rate and learning will be your responsibility. You can take your time, step by step. There's no time limit.

Don't put yourself down because nobody knows everything. No matter what your learning ability may be, Lutheran Settlement House makes the difference.

The most important thing you can do for yourself is to come to class every time and never give up. Keep coming back.

All the services at the Women's Program are free. Welfare will pay for transportation, childcare, and the G.E.D. testing fee. Some child care is available at Lutheran for children younger than five. Many SEPTA lines come close to LSH. For exact information, call SEPTA information at 580-7800.

Wear comfortable, casual clothing to class. All you need to bring is paper and a pen. The other students will welcome you. You will learn from each other.

We are students of all ages, from 17 up, all races, sexual orientations, women and men. If you think you can't learn, try Lutheran!

ADVICE FROM THE AFTERNOON CLASS, 1991